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PERILOUS FIGHT

AMERICA'S INTREPID WAR *WITH*
BRITAIN *ON THE* HIGH SEAS,
1812-1815

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The politics of American and British naval strategy in the War of 1812

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1.

Just a few weeks after arriving in Washington in January 1813 to take up the post of secretary of the navy, William Jones issued an order to all of his captains setting forth a new strategy for the war against Britain. I say new, but it is probably more accurate to say the *first* strategy, since Jones's predecessor, Paul Hamilton, had almost completely refrained from offering any strategic directions whatsoever — save for cautioning American naval captains to avoid engaging a superior enemy force. And so each captain had simply sailed where he thought best and decided for himself what to do when he got there.

The three stunning single-ship victories by American frigate commanders against British warships in the opening months of the War of 1812 had created a surge of enthusiasm in America — and an outpouring of indignation and calls for vengeance in Britain. They had also reinforced the quite correct belief on the part of American captains that the surest individual path to public fame, career advancement, and personal glory lay in duplicating these triumphs against their storied counterparts of the Royal Navy.

But Jones knew that this was hardly the surest path for the navy and the country, certainly not when facing an enemy possessing a literal 100 to 1 advantage in ships and manpower.

Jones, unlike Hamilton, was an experienced mariner and soldier, almost the antithesis of the career politician that Hamilton was — Hamilton, a plantation owner and former governor of South Carolina, had been chosen for the job almost entirely for political reasons and knew next to nothing about ships and the sea. Jones was another story. As a 15-year-old militia volunteer he had fought at Princeton and Trenton in the Revolution; had served aboard an American privateer and in the Continental Navy later in the war; in the succeeding years he had been captain of a militia artillery company in Charleston, a ship owner and merchant captain in Philadelphia; had sailed to China and India and had a broad practical knowledge of ships, oceangoing commerce, and simply how to run things in a businesslike manner. He had served one term as a member of Congress and knew enough about politics to detest public life and the “lashing” and “calumny” that

he said a public man was always subject to.¹ He had turned down Jefferson's offer of the post of navy secretary back in 1801 and had only reluctantly accepted Madison's offer this time. But his friends had implored him to serve his country in its time of need, and indeed one of Jones's greatest strengths would prove to be his lack of political ambition, which freed him to make tough decisions.

And so almost as soon as Jones arrived in Washington he was dashing off instructions which made it clear that henceforth the commanders under his authority were going to do what the secretary of the navy told them to do. And what the secretary was telling them to do was to forego the pursuit of single-combat valor in favor of a kind of hit-and-run guerilla warfare, staging diversions across the full length and breadth of the Atlantic. Jones wrote in his order:

Our great inferiority in naval strength, does not permit us to meet them on his ground without hazarding the precious Germ of our national glory.—we have however the means of creating a powerful diversion, & of turning the Scale of annoyance against the enemy. It is therefore intended, to dispatch all our public ships, now in Port, as soon as possible, in such positions as may be best adapted to destroy the Commerce of the enemy, from the Cape of Goodhope, to Cape Clear . . .

If any thing can draw, the attention of the enemy, from the annoyance of our coast, for the protection of his own, rich & exposed Commercial fleets, it will be a course of this nature, & if this effect can be produced, the two fold object of increasing the pressure upon the enemy and relieving ourselves, will be attained. . .²

One of Secretary Jones's other early, decisive actions was to call for the quick construction of six new sloops of war to help implement his strategy of hit and run commerce raiding — these were small, 18-gun ships, half the length and a third the tonnage of the frigates like the *Constitution*.

Today we'd call this asymmetric warfare; the aim was less the actual damage to the British economy that might be inflicted than the confusion and disarray it would sow in British naval plans, forcing a constant diversion of British naval power to counter this constant harassment. Jones did not have any illusion that he was going to bring the British economy to its knees; rather, he saw that attacking Britain's huge merchant fleet was the best way to hinder and tie up a disproportionate number of the enemy's forces. It was a recognition that Britain's huge presence on the oceans was also her greatest vulnerability.

It's extremely telling and significant that from the start, Jones was also thinking about the psychological and political effects of this strategy on British official and public opinion. In June 1813, as the sloop-of-war

Argus was preparing to sail, Jones sent her captain William Henry Allen instructions that underscored just this point:

It is exceedingly desirable that the enemy should be made to feel the effect of our hostility . . . and in no way can we so effectually accomplish that object, as by annoying, and destroying his commerce, fisheries, and coasting trade. The latter is of the utmost importance, and is much more exposed to the attack of such a vessel as the *Argus*, than is generally understood. This would carry the war home to their direct feelings and interests, and produce an astonishing sensation.³

2.

The cruise of the *Argus* was the first solid test of Jones's plan to strike diversionary blows at Britain's commerce with small, fast, solitary-cruising vessels, and for four weeks, the *Argus* marauded almost unchecked through British home waters. At the mouth of the English Channel, Allen took three homebound British merchantmen; then he repainted his ship to resemble a British man-of-war, with a broad yellow stripe along the gunports, and shifted his ground to the west, off the coast of Ireland. There, unnoticed in the night, he slipped within musket shot past a British frigate that was escorting a ninety-ship homebound convoy and began picking off stragglers.

By the time a British warship finally caught up with the *Argus* in the early morning hours of August 14, 1813, she had taken twenty prizes, twelve of them in just the previous three days.

During these same months the frigate *President*, under captain John Rodgers, was embarked on a sweeping commerce-raiding foray across the Atlantic, through the Azores, to the northern tip of Norway and back along the Irish coast. Many historians have faulted Rodgers' poor performance in this and his other cruises in the war, and indeed Rodgers himself wrote contritely to Jones upon his return at his chagrin at having taken only 12 enemy merchantmen during five months at sea. But Jones was full of praise when he replied to Rodgers, again underscoring that the effects went far beyond the conventional material measures of success:

The effects of your Cruize . . . is not the less felt by the enemy either in his Commercial or Military Marine, for while you have harassed and enhanced the dangers of the one, you provoked the pursuit & abstracted the attention of the other to an extent perhaps equal to the disproportion of our relative forces, and which will not cease until his astonishment shall be excited by the Account of your arrival.⁴

And indeed as we now know from the dispatches of the British commander on the North American station,

at one point there were 25 British warships, including 6 seventy-four gun ships of the lines and 10 frigates, patrolling the Atlantic from Newfoundland to the Virginia capes all trying unsuccessfully to catch Rodgers and block his return to port.⁵

Captain Allen's mistaken decision to engage the British warship that ended his cruise — and his life — solidified Madison's conviction in the soundness of Jones's strategy. The president wrote Jones lamenting Allen's loss but adding that his cruise:

. . . proves also the great capacity of that species of vessel to make the war an evil to G[reat].B[ritain], and particularly to the class of her subjects who promoted it. Would it be amiss to instruct such cruisers positively, never to fight when they can avoid it, and employ themselves entirely in destroying the commerce of the Enemy.⁶

Jones agreed. "The Character of the American Navy stands upon a basis not to be shaken, and needs no sacrifices by unequal combat to sustain its reputation," Jones wrote in what had become a typical instruction to captains by the end of 1813. "You will therefore avoid all unnecessary contact with the Cruisers of the Enemy, even with an equal, unless under circumstances that may ensure your triumph without defeating the main object of your Cruise." He also emphasized that by burning enemy merchantmen rather than trying to bring them into port as prizes, a single raider acting on "the destructive plan" would have "the power perhaps, of twenty acting upon pecuniary views alone."⁷

By the summer of 1814 the first of the new sloops were at sea and the pattern of disproportionate effectiveness became even clearer—as did the huge force multiplier that the political impact these raids had. In July and August dozens of British merchant ships were captured and burned by two American navy sloops-of-war and a few similarly sized American privateers operating around the British Isles. These events created a huge outcry among British merchants and was the direct genesis of the first sustained and major domestic opposition to the war—significantly, among the very classes who as Madison had noted had been most responsible for the British government policies that had precipitated the conflict.

On August 17, 1814, the directors of two major British insurance companies petitioned the government requesting "most earnestly" that the admiralty "prevent a repetition of these ruinous and unlooked-for losses to the Trade of this Country." Large meetings of merchants, ship-owners, and underwriters in Liverpool, Glasgow, Bristol and other port cities followed with even more urgent appeals. They noted that insurance rates just for the passage from England to Ireland had quintupled, and were now twice what they were even during the height of the war with France. "The number,

the audacity, and the success” of the American raiders, the merchants declared, “have proved injurious to the Commerce, are humbling to the pride, and discreditable to those who direct the great Naval Power of this Nation.”⁸

3.

William Jones’s opposing number in the British admiralty was John Wilson Croker. Croker was a character who could have come from the pages of one of Anthony Trollope’s novels chronicling the ambitious lives of the nineteenth-century British political classes. Like Jones, Croker was something of a self-made man; unlike Jones, he was a careerist politician through and through. A young, ambitious, Irish-born lawyer, already a rising literary and political star when elected to Parliament at age twenty-six in 1807, Croker was well known as a merciless partisan debater and polemicist, famous for vituperative personal attacks on political opponents both on the floor of the House of Commons and on the pages of literary reviews. One victim of his literary criticism called him “the wickedest of reviewers,” claiming he took a sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain on fellow authors.⁹

In January 1813, facing rising outrage in the press over the British defeats in the single-ship frigate battles, Croker had successfully put down his critics with his usual brand of withering sarcasm, much of it marshaled however in the service of vindicating his own personal performance in office. At that time even the loudest critics of the government’s conduct were solidly in favor of “teaching the Americans a lesson” and punishing their defiance of British command of the seas; the criticism was over the competence of the admiralty’s management of the war. A debate in Parliament ended a few months later with an unopposed vote in support of continuation of the war.

The difference now in the summer of 1814 was that the very wisdom of the war at all was being called into question. And here Croker badly miscalculated the politics of the changed situation. In answer to the petitions from the merchants demanding a force adequate to protect British trade, he at first sent a haughty reply that he was “commanded by their Lordships to acquaint you that there was a force adequate to the purpose of protecting the Trade.”

When this provoked more strident protests from the merchants, Croker dug himself in deeper by blandly stating that it was impossible of course to provide complete protection against “the occasional attempts of Privateers”: but if losses were occurring, the merchants had only themselves to blame, for violating orders requiring them to sail under the protection of convoys. He added that the admiralty would “bring to punishment the parties who may have been guilty of such illegal acts.”¹⁰

That statement set off a wave of indignant comment in the press, and even the *Naval Chronicle*’s editors began to speak of the “ill-fated” American war. In this climate of growing discontent with the war, the opposition was emboldened for the first time in the fall of 1814 to openly denounce the government for waging a “war of aggression and conquest.”¹¹ By November the government had quietly dropped all of its once “nonnegotiable” demands and had reached agreement with American negotiators at Ghent on the basic terms of a peace treaty ending the war.

4.

The British navy had made its own attempts to pressure American public opinion, but here too there was much miscalculation. In the summers of 1813 and 1814 a series of raids along the Chesapeake led by Rear Admiral George Cockburn had made him probably the most hated man in America but in fact had done little to weaken American resolve. The towns attacked were of essentially no strategic significance, Cockburn’s punitive policy of burning houses in towns that offered armed resistance stoked fury rather than demoralization among the American populace — and all the more so did the outrages committed by ill-disciplined troops recruited from French prisoners of war who under British command engaged in rape and pillage in an absolutely pointless attack on Hampton, Virginia. And the constant drain of manpower and ships these raids demanded undermined the larger British strategic objective of maintaining a tight blockade of the American coast.

There were also inevitable problems in coordinating land and sea forces in these complex amphibious operations that made these raids extremely costly for little gain. “We have done nothing but commit blunders,” complained a British army lieutenant colonel frustrated by Cockburn’s uncoordinated efforts. “Nothing was done with method . . . I have learned much on this expedition,” he went on to note: “how to embark and disembark large bodies in face of an enemy; how useless it is to have more than one commander; how necessary it is that the commanders by sea and land should agree and have one view: finally never to trust Admiral Cockburn.”¹²

Even the following summer, with the attacks on Baltimore and Washington, the expectations of the British commanders on the scene were far ahead of the political reality. Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane, the naval commander in chief, was convinced that once the Americans were “taught to know that they are at the mercy of an invading foe,” the pressure on the American government to accede to terms would be inexorable. But much like the situation America would find itself in trying to inflict punishment on North Vietnam, the problem was that America was not, in the

modern parlance, a target-rich environment. General Wellington himself had warned the government, when asked his opinion, that the vast and “thinly peopled” continent of America was simply ill-suited to an extended military campaign that could tip the strategic balance decisively. “I do not know where you could carry on such an operation which would be so injurious to the Americans as to force them to sue for peace,” he advised.¹³

The result, as one analyst pointed out with regard to the American bombing of Hanoi during the Vietnam war, was that the British raids yielded an almost perfect combination of moral indignation and military ineffectiveness: they were destructive enough to make Americans mad, without being destructive enough to do them any real harm.

The contempt for Americans that animated top British officials like Admiral Cochrane blinded them to the ineffectuality and counter-productivity of their attempts to sway public opinion through punitive measures. Admiral Cochrane, complaining about a fellow officer who he believed was too lenient on the Americans, wrote, “When he is better acquainted with the American Character he will possibly see as I do that like Spaniels they must be treated with great severity before you ever make them tractable.”¹⁴

The local British naval commanders more than once also made the mistake of overestimating the breadth and depth of domestic political opposition to the war; many formed their views about American public opinion from the anglophilic Federalist newspapers and many also leaped to the conclusion that rampant local collaboration with the British naval forces in terms of selling farm produce in particular was a sign of impending political upheaval that would knock America out of the war. But one young naval lieutenant stationed off Boston observed that most of the local “rascals” who eagerly filled the British squadron’s orders for supplies were opportunists, not allies, even in strongly Federalist New England; they only “like the English as a spendthrift loves an old rich wife,” he wrote in his journal; “the sooner we are gone the better.”¹⁵

5.

The Treaty of Ghent called for an almost complete return to the status quo ante; it failed even to mention the two explicit war aims that America had repeatedly stated as its reason for declaring war — an end to impressment and the recognition of neutral maritime rights. Yet in the war for perception, America clearly was the winner. Madison’s Republican party would ride its claim of victory in the war to political power for a generation; and even in Britain there was a powerful sense of having been humbled by a tiny foe. Some of this was of course the simple fact that a vastly weaker combatant can be seen to triumph simply by not being

beaten. But I think a lot of this perception can be traced directly to the shrewdly calculated strategy of William Jones to employ America’s naval power in a way that maximized both its military effectiveness and its psychological effect on British pride, self-assurance, and assumptions — and to the corresponding failure of British commanders to carry out a strategy that succeeded in operating effectively on the American political calculus.

“Sic transit gloria mundi,” declared an editorialist in the British *Naval Chronicle* in a final column on the American war. “An inglorious, unsuccessful, war must naturally end in such a peace as America chose to give,” he observed; for the whole world had “looked on with wonder, and seen the mightiest efforts of Britain, at the era of her greatest power, so easily parried, so completely foiled.”¹⁶

¹ William Jones to Eleanor Jones, January 23, 1813, William Jones Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereinafter WJP).

² Circular from William Jones to Commanders of Ships now in port refitting, February 22, 1813, *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1985), II: 47–49 (hereinafter *NW1812*).

³ William Jones to William Henry Allen, June 5, 1813, *NW1812*, II: 139–41.

⁴ William Jones to John Rodgers, October 4, 1813, *NW1812*, II: 254–55.

⁵ John B. Warren to John W. Croker, October 16, 1813, *NW1812*, II: 260–61.

⁶ James Madison to William Jones, October 15, 1813, WJP.

⁷ William Jones to George Parker, December 8, 1813; Jones to John O. Creighton, December 22, 1813, *NW1812*, II: 293–97.

⁸ “II.—Further Papers Relating to the War with America,” ff. 103–6, CO 42/160, The National Archives, London, U.K. (hereinafter TNA).

⁹ Louis J. Jennings, ed., *The Croker Papers, Papers: The Correspondence and Diaries of the Late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker, LL.D., F.R.S., Secretary of the Admiralty from 1809 to 1830* (New York, 1884), 1–2, 18, 20–22.

¹⁰ *Naval Chronicle* 32 (1814): 218–19; “III.—Further Papers Relating to the War with America,” ff. 109–10, CO 42/160, TNA.

¹¹ *Naval Chronicle* 32 (1814): 218–19; *Morning Chronicle*, November 22, 1814, quoted in Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812* (Urbana, Ill., 1995), 292.

¹² William Francis Patrick, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier, G.C.B.* (London, 1857), 218, 221–22.

¹³ Wellington quoted in C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Reprint: Sandwich, Mass., 1995), 195.

¹⁴ Alexander F. I. Cochrane to Robert Saunders Dundas Melville, September 3, 1814, *NW1812*, III: 269–70.

¹⁵ Henry Edward Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in the H.M.S. Nymphé* (Salem, Mass., 1939), 22, 23.

¹⁶ *Naval Chronicle* 33 (1815): 295–96.